

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
November 15, 2020- 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost- 28A  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

**Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18; Psalm 90: 1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25. 14-30**  
**'Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.' †**

---

Today our Scriptures foretell sorrow and darkness... the prophet Zephaniah gives warning about the coming Day of Judgment... and the Psalmist speaks of the weariness of this mortal life. Despite the fact that Christmas is quickly approaching, we are drawn to a place that seems far from such comforting scenes as a country church sitting in the midst of snow-covered fields and emitting a lovely glow through stained –glass windows. Instead, our Scriptures seem dark and discouraging: “The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5.2). And we hear another parable from Matthew’s Gospel that seems very harsh. It comes from that same Gospel that begins with a wondrous story of the infant born in a stable, identified by the bright light of a great star—the fulfillment of a promise of salvation. Today, instead of reassurance, Jesus warns ‘those who have, more will be given... but to those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’ We’ve heard stories of exclusion from wedding feasts and of weeping and gnashing of teeth!  
... I wonder why?

The Psalmist bids us recite some sober and tough words— life ‘is but labor, pain, and sorrow ... and passes quickly.’ And yet notice that the passage ends on a positive note, ‘teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.’ That is, that we may pay attention to what really matters in life! This is similar to the reassurance St. Paul has given that early Christian community in Thessalonica... this is one of the earliest letters we have (? 30-50 AD) and its written to a group waiting for the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus (which they really thought would be this Thursday!). They are afraid their loved ones who have died (parents, grandparents, cousins) will be left behind at the Parousia, the coming of the Lord. As we heard last week and again today, Paul tells them to “encourage one another” in their difficult times. For “whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.”

Last week we also learned from the 5 foolish and 5 wise bridesmaids that of us all must be proactive in pursuing our God-given duties. Today’s story of talents reminds us that we all have been given gifts. Just as in the parable, each servant has ‘received according to his abilities,’ each one of us has been given gifts and responsibilities that God felt we could handle. And God demands that we use what we have been given, not waste it, not hide it. The main point is that if we don’t use the gifts we’ve been given, we’ll lose them! Just like an ability to sing, play a musical instrument, or speak another language... without regular practice, these talents are lost. Jesus makes it clear, the wise way is not to sit idly by but to develop and nurture the talents we are given by our God.

It’s too easy to withdraw and stay isolated, to hide from others, to stay quiet or passively aggressive from fear. Indeed, it almost compensatory in the midst of government intervention during the COVID pandemic. And in our present social environment, where any sense of disagreement seems marked with conflict, it’s seems easier and safer just to

keep quiet. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of my favorite theologians, once made the comment: 'The great sin of respectable people in society is... running away from responsibility.' For him, the heart of the Nazi's horrible success in German society, stemmed from many Christians failing to use and exercise the 'talents' and knowledge God gave them. Jesus' parable messages are all about taking a positive, proactive stance; being prepared and proactive, not giving in to fear and quarrelling.

One of the wonderful things I've discovered here at St. Mark's, despite it being a very small parish, is that all of us participate in a common "spiritual journey." A journey that involves listening, discerning, and 'trying-on' things God may be calling us to do- like the food distribution program for those without means to have regular nutritious meals. We are willing to take a chance and try something different, and possibly even fail... like our new outdoor version of the Christmas Bazaar! Remember, some of the greatest human accomplishments came only through learning by initial failure. Together— as a local parish and as a group of parishes within our region— we have the opportunity to embark on such spiritual journeys, which don't start with specific goals, but with openness to the unexpected. They start with considering how best to use the gifts we've been given.

Consider the parable of the talents... What has God given you? What has The Master entrusted to you to develop and grow? And what is happening around you in this very disruptive world that might be causing fear and limiting your willingness to do for others? What is it that God is calling you to do?

As we come upon the Advent season and prepare for Christmas, let's remember it's not just about the number of talents we've received... some have received more than others, each according to their ability. It's not the size of the gift, it's what we do with what we've been given that is essential! Let's pray to be willing to take risks, to speak truth and strive to live God's message of love and reconciliation. What might God be calling you to do?

†